

**Back Again, Back Again: I Still Believe in the Kindness of
Others**

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty one: I Still Believe in the Kindness of Others.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Look towards all that they have, Leander hummed. The laerds and the kings and the rich in their homes. How do we pull it forth and spread it out?

Silence, silence, silence. I couldn't keep my tongue - I said, hesitatingly, tripping over the middle syllables of the new word - *we could try to... ingratiate ourselves. To them.*

Callia turned her gaze on me, slow and steady. Carefully, jaw jutted just the slightest degree - just enough to make me grateful she was taking the time and courtesy to curb her words, she said - *yes, IlyaaS, because that has worked so well before.*

She didn't say *prometide* or mention my prince. She didn't say his name. She was trying to be nice, but the disdain still pushed through.

Well - Leander began. Have you looked towards all the laerds, capitán? In the town where I lived, the laerd started a school from their house. They protected the children from the draft by volunteering for other taxes, often which came from their own house. The lottery takes effect when there is reluctance or apathy - not even the kings would turn down a willing donor. My laerd made sure that it never came to that. There were Longest Night parties every year in their house and birthday celebrations for elders and matriarchs and children of the laerd.

This story is set up for a "but then," poeta, but you are trying to pretend otherwise, Callia interrupted. Finish the story. Tell me why I haven't heard of this laerd.

Leander shifted uncomfortably, tucking their feet beneath them on the ground. *Well, they began. Well. But then - the laerd grew sick and forgetful. Then they died. The laerd's children, now half-grown, were raised in court and did not think to remember their people back in the countryside. No one volunteered for a tax. Our numbers came up for our children. And we assumed it had been a mistake and did not do as they said and - their voice had lost its musicality - the cadence they fell*

into. This was a harried rush of words, one tripping out over another, a scared kid trying to skip the worst of a story while every fibre of their being refused to let them yield.

Callia stiffened, but her voice was gentle. *You don't have to finish.*

They came with soldiers, Leander said, face carefully blank, words in perfect practiced storyteller lilt. My sister ran. They put an arrow through her back.

Silence. Callia sank to her knees beside Leander and pulled them into a long, long hug.

Then why would we turn to them? She asked.

Because - Leander managed, in gulping breaths, lashes thick with tears, because those who made it out of town only continued to survive because of the help of neighboring villages. Because people reach out to hold the hands of those on the ground beside them. Because I still believe in the kindness of others.

They quieted, breathing hard, and took a moment to compose themselves. Leander scrubbed at their face.

This has not convinced me of anything, said Callia.

That's okay, Leander said. There is another "but then." But then, Callia of Rhysea and its people, those of us who survived were taken in by a nearby village. They brought us to their laerd. She kept us safe until we could stand on our own again. Because she, too, believed in the kindness of others. She is the

one who sponsored me, when the time came to find the poet. She did not ask for anything in return. And she does believe in prophecy.

It was - almost too perfect. Support. Funding. Maybe, maybe, possibly, without asking for anything in return.

This sounds like a trap, Callia said, simply.

Accepting kindness is always an exercise in trust, Leander responded. Let me go to speak with her, even if you will not.

Absolutely not, I cut in. I'm not letting either of you go alone. Together or not at all. I turned to Callia. That is what you believe in, right? Together or not at all. That has to be the three of us, too, if we want to succeed.

Her mouth went thin. Finally, she conceded, Together or not at all. She raised an eyebrow. But careful, poeta - careful, Leander. I do not trust them. It is one thing to dole out kindness to those so far below you. It is another to help the system you run fall.

I believe in her, Leander contested. Believe in me.

Callia shot a glance my way. I'm sure she was remembering a version of this conversation had between her and Iolo and I. I think Callia heard echoed the I don't trust her, that had run thick between her and I. I think she remembered Iolo offering to give the grace that, at the time, she could not.

If we would learn to work together, we all had to lean into each other. It was my turn to play Iolo's part. *I believe in Leander*, I said, despite my misgivings. I thought about the way even Cassian, the son of a tyrant, a tyrant yet to come, had almost turned away. I looked at the hope Leander held in their eyes and tried to make that enough to stake my life. *I trust them to do what is right. Believe in me, too.*

Callia drew in a shaky breath. She took my face in one hand and Leander's in the other. Her nails dug into my chin, but I did not pull away.

I will, she said, finally. *I will*.

We began to pack three days after that conversation. We held one vote, then another, arguing to give this laerd a chance to help us remake the world.

The decision passed. Barely, but it passed. Rhia voted for it, to my surprise, her hand going up after a long second of hesitation. Haast, eyes hard, voted against. She did not ever stand to make her point, but we all knew it well enough.

Haast and Callia fought over her leaving. I wasn't supposed to see it, I don't think, but I did. Callia spent every second that the three of us were not stretching and testing at the webs that held us together, *rex et poeta et soldat*, with Haast. They talked over things she shooed me away from - she didn't do it angrily, just with a look that told me that not all things were

for me or about me. And that was fine. That I understood. There were things of mine that weren't for her, either, late-night conversations between Rhia and I about our childhoods. I tried to explain the American South to her in the most honest way I could – in English, finally not curbing my intention with clunky Rhysean language. It was only here, with my first friend in this world, that I allowed myself to feel the dregs of longing I still carried with me for this world (after all, that question lurked, even there even then – always that question, *where is home?* I didn't know then. I still don't now.)

Rhia stayed in English for those conversations only, a strange and forlorn version of the bits of wonder we used to exchange on palace rooftops. She told me about her teacher at the castle and what it had been like to grow up beside Cassian and then grow up alone. She blushed through the story of the first time she'd kissed Iolo and shook her head at the memory the only time she'd drank too much *traem* – once had been enough to learn her lesson. She closed her eyes and told me about being small and braiding Cassian's hair. She told me that she thought the queen had, when she was quite small, in some different time, loved her.

The fear that our pasts would come back and swallow us whole didn't rear their heads that late at night. When the stars were out, and when we were together, we could talk.

But we weren't stupid enough to say the words *despite it all, I still miss it, I do*. Even if they were a little bit true. I mean - The *fretim* wasn't often glorious. We all - more than just Rhia and I, but everyone who had memories of safer times - sometimes missed the places we came from, whether we wanted to or not. For Rhia, for me, to say more than objective memory was to risk being recalled to the place in Rhysea we were made, even under the protection of the stars. Neither of us were stupid or selfish or sentimental enough for that.

I learned about her childhood. She learned about mine. She tilted her head onto my shoulder and let me cross my legs over hers; during the day she passed laundry off for me to wring out while she scrubbed and we sang songs to fill the lulls and silences.

We sang, we told stories; Haast and Callia fought. The very last one they had before our leaving carried, even though it was not meant for outside ears. They were both throwing words around far too fast for me to catch more than half of it - most people had fallen into the habit of speaking slower around me - and some of it bounced sideways into that traveler-Rhysean, but the point was clear. Haast did not like what we were doing. She did not want to bow at the feet of a different laerd.

You can't - Haast said. That I caught. There was more, an angry building of voices I didn't understand, but Callia's sliced through Haast's.

This might be our only chance. We don't have enough to keep going on our own for much longer. Support - She sighed the word, and then her voice dropped low enough that it once again became just for Haast. By the time I found my nerve to turn the corner and look both of them in the eye, Haast had pulled Callia into a tight hug, face buried in her hair.

Callia caught sight of me and pushed Haast back to speak. Haast beat her to it, reaching one hand up to cover Callia's mouth.

I hear there is a web of trust, Eligidida. You and the poet and my captain - and a laerd. It is the kind of story that ends badly for the heroes.

I know, I said.

Don't let it become a gallows song, she said.

I'll try, I said.

Callia pulled Haast's hand away and tucked her arm through the crook of her elbow. *Don't worry, dear one. I won't.*

We packed. Leander took their lute, Callia her swords. All of us tightly rolled to try and avoid wrinkling the fanciest clothing we could dredge up, *rex et poeta et soldat*. From a bag marked with the performer's insignia, we found a tub of gold

paint and shoved that in, as well, because to sell this, to sell this, we would need to be kings.

So we set out – thrumming with hope, heady with intention – to catch a laerd.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. “Nightingales” once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you’re enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you’ll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more. If you’d like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you’ve made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that you do not have to fill your days with

action and creation to be worthy of the space you take up. You were made already whole.

The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. I hope you have a wonderful day.